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HOUSTON CHRONICLE

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CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK

Drive-thru testing site opens in north Houston

Mark Mulligan / Staff photographer

Medical personnel transport a patient to an isolation area after the person displayed severe symptoms at the drive-thru site.

'THIS IS THE REAL DEAL': Officials working on plans for four more locations

By Samantha Ketterer
STAFF WRITER

Shane Streicher had body aches but no fever, yet he had heard stories about people who tested positive for COVID-19 without some of the most serious symptoms.

On Thursday morning, he waited in his car in a line that at times stretched 3 miles long at an Acres Homes medical site that was offering free testing for the novel coronavirus. The 38-year-old man neared the front of the line, holding his passport to prove he had just returned from the Netherlands. Recent travelers abroad are also considered compromised.

"I may get turned away," Streicher said, speaking out of the window of his car. "But that's foolish of them if they do."

The United Memorial Medical Center on Thursday opened its parking lot to the masses, making it the first area location to offer free COVID-19 drive-thru testing to the public. Houston and Harris County officials were meanwhile solidifying their plans for four publicly operated drive-thru testing sites, one of which is scheduled to open Friday.

The general public, however, is being told not to show up at a city site at Butler Stadium. Testing will instead focus on first responders and medical

Testing continues on A9

More inside

» *What we can learn from Houston area's first 50 cases.* **Page A3**

» *Harris County to delay evictions amid outbreak.* **Page A4**

» *Local unemployment claims more than tripled in March.* **Page B2**

For the latest updates, go to **houstonchronicle.com/coronavirus**

Coronavirus at a glance

243,912	14,250	325*	9,890	205	5
Confirmed cases worldwide	Confirmed cases in U.S.	In Texas	Deaths worldwide	Deaths in U.S.	Deaths in Texas

**11 additional cases were repatriated to Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland*
Source: WHO, CDC, Johns Hopkins University

Texas fights virus with new rules

HEALTH DISASTER: Abbott joins in shutting schools

By Taylor Goldenstein
AUSTIN BUREAU

In the most aggressive statewide move yet to combat the coronavirus pandemic in Texas, Gov. Greg Abbott issued an executive order Thursday that limits social gatherings to no more than 10 people, closes all schools, shuts down bars and restricts restaurants.

The orders came as Department of State Health Services Commissioner John Hellerstedt declared a public health disaster, the first in more than 100 years, and called COVID-19, the illness caused by the new coronavirus, the "greatest public health challenge in living memory."

Effective midnight Friday until at least April 3, the orders also end most visitation at nursing homes and assisted living facilities and effectively close gyms and massage parlors. While they

Texas continues on A11

Case load, deaths rise statewide

FIRST IN THE COUNTY: Man in late 80s dies in Harris

By Dylan McGuinness and Zach Despart
STAFF WRITERS

The number of new coronavirus cases statewide saw its single largest jump Thursday, as Harris County marked its first death and Texas declared a public health disaster.

A man in his 80s died Wednesday night at a Harris County hospital. The nursing home resident's case had been confirmed earlier that day, according to Dr. Umair Shah, the county's public health director.

The man is the fifth Texan to die with COVID-19, the disease caused by the virus. Another man was reported dead Thursday in Dallas County, with previous fatalities in Matagorda, Collin and Tarrant counties.

Shah said he is worried about a

Deaths continues on A11

Sheriff wants some inmates freed

'BOLD ACTION': Judges' approval needed for preventive measure

By Gabrielle Banks
STAFF WRITER

More than 8,500 people are housed inside the Harris County jail, and thousands more move through the building and return to their communities each day to keep the criminal justice juggernaut running.

Sheriff Ed Gonzalez likens the situation to three massive ships docked in downtown Houston. An outbreak of COVID-19 in this setting could be catastrophic to the region and overwhelm hospitals' limited capacity to treat patients.

That's why the sheriff overseeing the third largest jail system in the country is pushing for "bold action" to avert the potential fallout – he is seeking compassionate releases of hundreds of vulnerable people who pose a low risk to public safety. For that to happen, judges would need to sign off.

"Jails and prisons are fertile ground for the spread of infectious disease," Gonzales said, noting that his staff has done "yeoman's work to keep an outbreak at bay," addressing hygiene and health concerns. "My nightmare scenario is that an outbreak happens at the county jail."

But he said, "The standards we implement in the general community are either impossible to follow or hard to do in a jail setting. Our criminal justice system must become more aggressive in

Release continues on A9

Mark Mulligan / Staff file photo

"Jails and prisons are fertile ground for the spread of infectious disease," Harris County Sheriff Ed Gonzales said.

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